



## **President LeBlanc's Opening Address OPFFA Special Convention – November 30, 2009**

Good afternoon Brothers and Sisters and welcome to the Special Convention of the Ontario Professional Fire Fighters Association where we are recognizing that we are once again fully affiliated.

This gathering was 26 years in the making and it is historic in every sense. Today, we will recognize the financial benefits of becoming whole but before we address the resolution I want to put this day into context.

Professional fire fighters in Ontario first gathered collectively to be educated and represented provincially in August of 1920. At that time we were known as the Provincial Federation of Ontario Fire Fighters. While the name may have changed our goal has remained to improve our working conditions and thus the livelihood of our members and their families.

In 1937 the delegates choose to affiliate with the International Association of Fire Fighters which provided our members with an International voice and the muscle to enhance our representation both provincially and federally. However, in the early 1980's frustration from - various locals and our provincial with the IAFF over service levels grew to a boiling point and forceful action was taken. First, four locals disaffiliated from the IAFF while remaining with the OPFFA. This was followed with the majority of OPFFA locals voting to voluntarily forfeit our provincial IAFF charter. Finally, the delegates who gathered in Thunder Bay for the OPFFA's 63<sup>rd</sup> annual convention in June 1983 deleted the requirement for OPFFA locals to have mandatory affiliation with the IAFF.

This action opened the door to what many refer to as the "split". Numerous locals disaffiliated from the OPFFA maintaining their IAFF charters and the locals who remained with the OPFFA affiliated with the Canadian Association of Fire Fighters. The IAFF responded by re-Chartering the original provincial organization the Provincial Federation of Ontario Fire Fighters to provide a provincial voice to those locals who remained under the IAFF.

For 14 years professional fire fighters across Ontario carried different union cards until the Mike Harris government took power and acted out with a massive overhaul of our governing legislation, the Fire Departments Act, creating the Fire Protection and Prevention Act. This required a response which called on the joint efforts of the OPFFA, PFOFF and the IAFF.

This legislative undertaking exposed the power of a collective voice for professional fire fighters and discussions began about merging the two provincial organizations for the betterment of all professional fire fighters in Ontario.

The same provincial government also implemented wide-spread municipal amalgamations which all but made a PFOFF / OPFFA merger a necessary reality. Locals from different unions were now under one employer and the time for one provincial organization was clear.

Under the leadership of Jim Lee and Bruce Carpenter the respective OPFFA and PFOFF Presidents of the time, the two Executive Boards approved a principal merger document. Next both provincial convention bodies approved the merger document at their respective conventions in June 1997. An overriding element within that document was the return of mandatory affiliation with the IAFF to also be a member of a newly merged provincial association. Referendum votes were held across the province with all OPFFA locals voting to re-affiliate with the IAFF having their original IAFF Charters returned. The official unification convention was held in Niagara Falls in October of 1997 and the new OPFFA was formed.

Despite coming just shy of our goal to re-unite all professional fire fighters charted with the IAFF under one provincial banner the first annual convention of the new OPFFA was held in Thunder Bay in 1998.

The OPFFA admittedly struggled to find its way in the early days, as it was trying to respond to what this newly merged membership required and desired from its provincial organization. As with any new entity, and was the experience with those involved in the municipal amalgamations, the merger of cultures despite common goals proved to be a challenge.

Ultimately the OPFFA did find its place and is now an envied organization for the quality of education and representation provided to its members and we are a highly respected player in provincial politics.

Today I am inherently proud and consider myself fortunate to be the first OPFFA President in 26 years to preside over a provincial organization where all IAFF Locals across Ontario are also affiliated with the Ontario Professional Fire Fighters Association.

Since becoming the OPFFA President in June of 2002 complete unification has always been one of my goals. Today that goal has been fulfilled. But this was not a solitary effort and I want to take this opportunity to introduce and publicly thank my Executive Board:

EVP Mark McKinnon	S/T Barry Quinn
District 1 V/P Ernie Thorne	District 2 V/P Chris Francescone
District 3 V/P Mike Pauze	District 4 V/P Terry Colburn
District 5 V/P Warren Scott	District 6 V/P Randy Richards
District 7 V/P Eric Nordlund	President Emeritus Pat DeFazio

As well I would like to acknowledge the local Executive Boards involved in the respective affiliations, in particular the current Executive Board of the Mississauga Fire Fighters Association Local 1212 who went the extra mile this past year in advocating re-affiliation with their membership.

I believe many in this room understand that this particular situation took an extraordinary effort and went beyond just a local and provincial association meeting and discussing the merits of affiliation. I want to recognize the guidance, support and efforts extended by both IAFF 13<sup>th</sup> District Vice President Bruce Carpenter and IAFF General President Harold Schaitberger.

Bruce was a continuous advocate for provincial affiliation and joined us recently when we made presentations to the membership of Local 1212. President Schaitberger, himself a former State President and also a strong advocate of state and provincial affiliation, took a personal interest and traveled to Mississauga solely for the purpose of supporting and promoting re-affiliation with the OPFFA. In fact it was President Schaitberger who traveled again to Mississauga and met with then Local 1212 President Marty Goodkey and me where he facilitated a memorandum of agreement for re-affiliation.

Although re-affiliation did not occur immediately thereafter it was that document that formed the structure of the OPFFA's and Local 1212's reconciliation.

Brother Carpenter, General President Schaitberger on behalf of the Executive Board and entire membership of the OPFFA - thank you.

Before we get to the formal business of this convention I would like to call on an individual who was the former PFOFF President and was a key figure in the 1997 unification. In 1998 he became our District Vice President for the IAFF and has remained a strong supporter and advocate of the OPFFA – Brother & sisters please welcome IAFF District 13 Vice President Brother Bruce Carpenter.

-DVP Carpenter's remarks-

Now I would like to call on a friend of fire fighters literally around the world. Our General President Harold Schaitberger has lifted the IAFF's status beyond anyone's expectations. He has introduced programs, such as the legal guardian policy, the front line policy, and the disaster relief fund, that illustrates the power and the caring of the IAFF at the grassroots level.

A political powerhouse individually President Schaitberger has branded the IAFF as an entity politicians covet and other originations admire.

Most recently President Schaitberger guided the IAFF's efforts to reform the SAFER Program where during these tough economic times fire fighters who were laid off were called back, and others threatened to be on the chopping block were saved. Harold's political savvy and

leadership knows no bounds. He has proven this federally in both countries, as well as at the provincial, state and local levels.

Yet despite working on the larger stage he has never lost focus on the membership and our best interest. This was clearly illustrated when he personally became involved in the efforts for reunification in Ontario and is marked by his presence here today.

Brothers and Sisters please join me in welcoming our General President Harold Schaitberger.

-General President Schaitberger's remarks-